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What Teachers Should Know about Racism, Prejudice, and Privilege: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Although racial groupings are not biologically determined, socially constructed racial categorizations greatly influence an individual's material conditions and lived experiences. Social, economic, political, and educational realms are stratified as a result of racism, or the racist structures embedded in institutions and policies that allow whites to control the majority of resources. The extent to which the dominant group is collectively privileged in the United States' society is difficult for whites to fully comprehend due to their social position.
Teacher candidates need to understand the ways in which economic and social manifestations of racism affect educational institutions, which in turn perpetuates the racial sorting of students. White preservice teachers in particular need to be guided to understand structural racism and white privilege so they can effectively teach culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students. In this article, one teacher educator shares a review of the literature that helped her move beyond good intentions toward an anti-racist stance.

I must admit, it took me a long time to learn how naïve I was about racism, prejudice and my own privilege. I was a middle-class, white, native English-speaking female entering the teaching profession in the early 1990s. I had traveled and studied in multiple countries, and I was working on becoming a bilingual teacher. My professors probably considered me well intentioned, wanting to teach a racially, culturally and linguistically diverse student body.

For nine years I was an elementary teacher working primarily in bilingual settings with Spanish-speaking students. I improved my facility with the Spanish language and knowledge of Latino cultures through travels, reading, and movies, all of which helped improve my relationships with my students and their families. Despite my good intentions, I felt guilty about my higher socioeconomic status and would dodge students' questions about where I lived or what kind of car I drove. My efforts were primarily focused on being a good "methodologist" and a non-racist person proficient in Spanish.

I now understand that my efforts to hide my racial and socioeconomic status were in vain. I was simply denying what was in plain view for my students. In fact, my energies spent on obfuscating my positionality were keeping me from fully comprehending the material and psychosocial reality of people of color. I began to believe that even though I was formally

educated, I was not "well-educated" about our racialized society and the effects of structural oppression.

I spent time learning about race, defining racism and prejudice, and interrogating my own privilege. I learned how my lack of racial and sociopolitical consciousness hindered my effectiveness as a white teacher of racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students because, through inaction and avoiding discussions of racism, classism, and linguicism, I was unwittingly perpetuating the status quo. I discovered how discussing "white racism" did not need to engender guilt, as it did in my teacher preparation and early teaching career, but could better help me to be an anti-racist "ally" to students and people of color. I believe this personal interrogation was as much of a benefit to my teaching as a study in new techniques and methodologies, if not more so.

This personal pursuit led me to the profession of teacher education, where I teach courses about diversity and bilingual/multicultural education. I share a review of the literature about topics that have been useful in both my personal and professional development.

After a brief introduction to the social construction of race, I define prejudice – a psychological construct – and racism – structural oppression based on racial categories. I then discuss King's (1991) notion of dysconscious racism, which has been especially helpful to my students. My hope is that knowing more as teacher educators will help us move teacher candidates beyond the safe notion of good intentions toward an anti-racist orientation.

THE NOTION OF RACE

Europeans and European-Americans created the notion of race in the 17th century to justify colonialism. In the United States specifically, the seizing of Native American lands and the African slave trade were justified by racial or biological differences between groups of people (Bennett, 1978; Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003). The founders of the United States needed to reconcile the notions of freedom, democracy, and individual liberties while structuring the hierarchical inequities inherent in capitalism. Consequently, the notion of race arose historically to satisfy an ideological need of the dominant groups to rationalize unequal access and position (Omi & Winant, 1993). Through chattel slavery and the treatment of Blacks as property, race and economic domination were inextricably fused. According to Harris (1995),

> The racialization of identity and the racial subordination of Blacks and Native Americans provided the ideological basis for slavery and conquest. Although the systems of oppression of Black and Native Americans differed in form—the former involving the seizure and appropriation of labor, the latter entailing the seizure and appropriation of land—undergirding both was a radicalized conception of property implemented by force and ratified by law. (p. 277)

By the 19th century, pseudoscientific explanations of white theorists deemed racial divisions natural (Oakes & Lipton, 2003) with whites seen as innately superior (Howard, 1999). Western expansion was aided by the notion of racial superiority, and manifest destiny justified the colonization of Latinos and taking of land from Native Americans (Takaki, 1993). The status and characteristics attached to racial inferiority were intentionally applied to other immigrant groups, such as the Chinese (Takaki, 1993). Later, the internment of Japanese citizens was justified by similar racial arguments.

It is now accepted among social scientists that biologically, race is not real (Omi & Winant, 1994). According to Mukhopadhyay and Henze (2003), the concept of race and the criteria to categorize different racial groups have been proven to be artificially constructed and inconsistently applied. For instance, two people with similar superficial characteristics or phenotypes might be categorized as different

races, depending on their ethnic heritage (Banks, 2003). Instead, the concept of race is understood to be a socially constructed way to categorize people (Johnson, 2001; Tatum, 1997). The criteria used to categorize people differ in each culture and the sociopolitical characteristics of a society are reflected in its racial categories. For example, the racial groups used in the United States are not the same as those in Latin America (Banks, 2003; Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003). Racial categories are also dynamic within a particular society. Over the past century, racial designations have varied widely, as seen in the legal means to define whiteness (Spring, 2004; Takaki, 1993) and changing U. S. Census categories (Brown, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1994). Racial labels may seem neutral, but they mask a system of power (Wildman & Davis, 2002).

Even though race is fabricated, the social, psychological, economic, and educational impact on majority and marginalized groups is real. The way we are categorized racially structures our access to resources, how we are treated, and how we treat others (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003). Race impacts our social arrangements and interactions. Racial categories help determine where people live, where they go to school, where they shop, for whom they will vote, and whom they will marry (Carter, 1997). The way people are designated racially greatly influences their self-concept (Lee, 2002), their lived experiences (Wellman, 1993), and their access to social and political services (Omi & Winant, 1994). "Race is an almost indissoluble part of our identities. Our society is so thoroughly racialized that to be without racial identity is to be in danger of having no identity" (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 5). The construct of race systematically stratifies people, and the "seductive concept" of a racial hierarchy (Morrison, 1992, p. 38) has become embedded in all aspects of the United States society. This "racial caste system" (West, 2001, p. 147) shapes not only those who are oppressed at the bottom, but also those with privileges at the top (Frankenberg, 1993). It is essential that white pre-service and in-service teachers understand the ways in which race impacts not only the lives of students of color, but also their own. The notion of race is inextricably tied to prejudice and racism, other concepts that, although frequently misconstrued, are vital for whites' sociopolitical understanding.

DEFINING PREJUDICE AND RACISM

People raised in the United States have been socialized to equate prejudice with racism (hooks, 1981; Tatum, 1997), regardless of their educational level (Scheurich, 1993). An important distinction needs to be made between the psychological aspects of prejudice and the structural component of racism, which is important in understanding the practices and institutions that sustain racial hierarchies (Ravitch, 2000; Sleeter, 1993a). Tatum (1997) defines prejudice as "a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information" (p. 5). Prejudice is the psychological or attitudinal dimension of racism (Sleeter, 1993a). Whites as well as people of color can have prejudices (Giroux, 1997) because all people in the United States have been exposed to misinformation and stereotypes about other groups of people (Sleeter, 2001; Tatum, 1997).

People socialized in the United States also learn that racism and discrimination are synonymous (Wildman & Davis, 2002). McIntosh (1988), for example, describes how she and other whites were raised to believe that racism is equated with mean, discriminatory acts by individuals. Discriminatory behavior is both fueled and rationalized by prejudice (Johnson, 2001). Racism, however, does not always take the form of overt discrimination (hooks, 1990) or observable behaviors. Neither biased attitudes—prejudice—nor biased behaviors—discrimination—accounts for the ways in which racial (dis)advantage are embedded into sociopolitical structures.

With a psychological or behavioral understanding of racism, white people who avoid active forms of racialized behavior, such as racist discourse and overt discrimination, would not consider themselves involved in or affected by racism (Tatum, 1994). It is difficult for whites to understand racism as a system

that shapes their beliefs, experiences, and self-identity (Frankenberg, 1993). Whites think of racism as something outside of their purview that people of color have to combat (Frankenberg, 1993; Johnson, 2001; Kivel, 1996). Within this paradigm, racism is not considered to be a problem in homogenously white communities (Katz, 1978; Rosenberg, 1997) or communities of color (hooks, 1990).

Racism is more than prejudice or discrimination (Ayers, 1997; Tatum, 1997). In his seminal book, Portraits of White Racism, Wellman (1993) defines racism as "a structural relationship based on the subordination of one racial group by another" (p. 55). Wellman focuses on three components of racism: the dominant position of whites, the benefits of having that societal position, and the institutions that maintain the racial hierarchy. The structures that maintain racism contribute to prejudicial beliefs and discrimination (Kivel, 1996; Sleeter, 2001). Prejudice and discrimination, in turn, reinforce racism. It is important to underscore the structural dimension of racism, which is distinct from the psychological aspects of prejudice that can manifest behaviorally as discrimination (Frankenberg, 1993; Tatum, 1997). A structural analysis focuses on how whites control resources to maintain dominant positions in economic, political, and social institutions (Frankenberg, 1993; Sleeter, 1993a).

Whites have a vested interest in justifying their societal privileges, which involves sustaining the structures of racial injustice. In her classic anti-racist training manual, Katz (1978) clarifies the role whites play in racism:

> Racism is a [w]hite problem in that its development and perpetuation rest with [w]hite people. Whites created racism through the establishment of policies and practices that serve to their advantage and benefit and continue to oppress all minorities in the United States. Racism is perpetuated by [w]hites through their conscious and/or unconscious support of a culture and institutions that are founded on racist policies and practices. The racial prejudice of [w]hite people coupled with the economic, political, and social power to enforce discriminatory practices on every level of life – cultural, institutional, and individual – is the gestalt of [w]hite racism. Therefore, the "race problem" in America is essentially a [w]hite problem in that it is [w]hites who developed it, perpetuate it, and have the power to resolve it. (p. 10)

By reinforcing a socially stratified society, racism rationalizes and defends privileges for white people (Johnson, 2001; Wellman, 1993) and reaffirms the self-perceived superiority of dominant groups (Sleeter, 1993a).

Racism still flourishes in the United States (López, 2003; Morrison, 1992), although "most individuals fail to identify its magnitude and breadth and limit its scope to superficial manifestations like prejudice, discrimination, and blatant intolerance" (López, 2003, p. 81). Despite some claims that the importance of race is decreasing (Wilson, 1980) or that racism is a thing of the past (Butler, 2003), in reality racism affects the social reality and material conditions of both whites and people of color (Frankenberg, 1993). This country was founded on and continues to operate under a doctrine of white supremacy (López, 2003; Harris, 1993; Katz, 1978). To highlight this point, scholars, such as West (2001), Kivel (1996), Wellman (1993), Helms (1990), and Sleeter (1993b), use the term white racism.

The ramifications of racism are often understood as the past disadvantages and victimization of people of color (Morrison, 1992; Ravitch, 2000). The disadvantages are not only a matter of historical record. People of color continue to suffer and be racially penalized, as evidenced in the "color-coded statistics that point to the ravages of institutional racism" (Lee, 2002, p. 27). There are egregious inequities in school success (Ewing, 2001), SAT scores (Loewen, 2002), incarceration rates (Wellman, 1993), drug convictions (West, 2001), access to health care (Sleeter, 2001), affordable housing loans, and exposure to environmental hazards (Lipsitz, 2002). West (2001) eloquently describes the

persistent marginalization and devaluation of Black youth and culture by mainstream institutions; Latinos, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and Asian Americans are similarly discredited. Even when people of color are recognized for their scholarly achievements and achieve economic success, they may have trouble hailing a taxi, be mistaken for service personnel, or be pulled over for "driving while Black" (Bartolomé & Macedo, 1997; Dyson, 1997; Spring, 2004; West, 2001).

Social indicators also reveal the systematic advantages of being white, ranging from higher salaries to improved life expectancy (Tatum, 1997). Whites outperform their peers in academic achievement, graduation rates, net worth, and coverage by health insurance (Sleeter, 2001). White cultural practices, linguistic patterns, and worldviews are privileged over those of people of color (Ravitch, 2000) and the experiences of whites are considered the norm (Butler, 2003; Sleeter, 1993a). These advantages, often taken-for-granted by whites (McIntosh, 1988) or seen as byproducts of hard work and ability, serve to maintain social, economic, political, and legal domination (Harris, 1995; Wellman, 1993). Whether actively or passively, whites use racism to defend their privileged access to premium jobs, housing, and schools (Tatum, 1997). Most whites fail to consider the privileges of being white, let alone the relationship of those privileges to racism.

WHITE PRIVILEGE: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF A RACIST SOCIETY

The legacy of the historical oppression of people of color is a racialized society and sociopolitical conditions that privilege whites and disenfranchise people of color (Bennett, 1978; Howard, 1999; West, 2001). This racial hierarchy is maintained by whiteness, the interconnected system of ideology and social structures that marginalizes and oppresses people of color (McIntyre, 1997). Whiteness is more than phenotypical differences or skin color, as seen by the ability of people of color to "pass" socially but be denied legal rights (Harris, 1995); whiteness is the power, embedded in social structures, which collectively advantages whites over people of color (Ravitch, 2000). According to Harris (1995),

> Whiteness in large part has been characterized not by an inherent unifying characteristic but by the exclusion of others deemed to be "not white." The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. (p. 283)

During certain periods in the history of the United States, the white mainstream chose to ignore select ethnic differences among specified European immigrant groups in order to broaden and solidify the dominance of whiteness. For example, the Catholic Irish, who were formerly persecuted, became assimilated into the white culture when they participated in the oppression of Blacks (Ignatiev, 1995). The arbitrarily defined differences between groups were used to categorize who was "not white" and then separate them from the rights and resources readily accessible to the mainstream (Brodkin, 2002; Takaki, 1993; West, 2001). Exploring whiteness is an examination not only of dominant attitudes and individual practices, but also the legal, political, and educational policies that have perpetuated and continue to perpetuate racism.

Interrogating whiteness, a system of dominance, in relation to racism, a system of oppression, is essential to help dominant groups understand the ways that inequities and privileges are inextricably braided into our social institutions (Lucal, 1996; Marshall & Ryden, 2000). Racism is the legacy of policies and social conventions that have exploited people of color (Giroux, 1997) and benefited whites economically, politically, socially, and psychologically (Wellman, 1993). Racism involves forceful systems of oppression (Ayers, 1997) as well as domination (hooks, 1981). Racism can be viewed as the institutionalization

of injustice along racial lines (Sleeter, 2001) or the institutionalization of privilege for whites (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2003). According to Johnson (2001), "Privilege is always in relation to others. . . . Everything that's done to receive or maintain it—however passive and unconscious—results in suffering and deprivation for someone" (p. 10). In short, racism is the other side of whiteness (Rothenberg, 2002).

Scholars of color support the investigation of whiteness, also termed white dominance and white supremacy. bell hooks (1990) urges white scholars to turn their inquiry from an external examination of people of color to their own racial group. Similarly, Toni Morrison (1992) encourages that the impact of racism on the perpetuators be added to the well-established study of the effects on the oppressed. The push for white people to look inward was also supported by Malcolm X and James Baldwin (Stalvey, 1989). In 1920, W. E. B. Du Bois (1920/1998) declared himself to be "singularly clairvoyant" about "White Folks" (p. 184), knowing whites better than they knew themselves, just as slaves had intimately known their masters.

Several white scholars have heeded this call to counter the dominant research paradigm of looking primarily at marginalized communities and turned their focus on the ideology and practices of their own dominant group (Ravitch, 2000). McIntosh (1988), Frankenberg (1993), Sleeter (1993a), Howard (1993, 1999), Fine (1997), and McIntyre (1997), to name a few, have provided a theoretical foundation for the inquiry of whiteness. Fine (1997) frames the paradigm shift as follows:

> What if we took the position that racial inequities were not primarily attributable to individual acts of discrimination targeted against persons of color, but increasingly to acts of cumulative privileging quietly loaded up on whites? That is, what if by keeping our eyes on those who gather disadvantage, we have not noticed white folks, varied by class and gender, nevertheless stuffing their academic and social pickup trucks with goodies otherwise not as readily available to people of color? (p. 57)

The inequities suffered by people of color are the flip side of the privileges granted to whites. The benefits of racism and whiteness for dominant members of a racist society, then, are known as white privilege.

Helms (1993) argues, "White people are born the benefactors and beneficiaries of racism, although they may not be consciously aware of their bequest" (p. 241). How can white people live in a socially stratified society yet remain unaware of the benefits bestowed upon their dominant and privileged group? King (1991) calls this phenomenon dysconscious racism. She explains, "Dysconscious racism is a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant [w]hite norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race . . ." (p. 135). Dysconsciousness impedes whites' recognition of the ways in which obstacles for people of color translate into privileges for them. Howard (1999) described himself as "both smart and dumb at the same time" (p. 69) before he understood social structures. McIntosh (1988) was taught that racism put others at a disadvantage, but no one ever discussed the corollary advantages in her life. Ravitch's (2000) and McIntyre's (1997) studies with white teachers highlight the paradox that whites understand that advantaged positions exist in the racial hierarchy but do not see themselves as privileged.

Although it is difficult for whites to see the dominance that stems from racism (Howard, 1999) and the extent to which their position in the social hierarchy is due to whiteness (Wellman, 1993), people of color easily recognize the status associated with being white (Delpit, 1995; Frankenberg, 1993). This is what Du Bois (1903/2003) coined "double-consciousness" (p. 5), or the ability to look at one's self through others' eyes. In order to navigate both sides of the "color line" (p. xli) at the turn of the century, Black people had to understand not only the workings of the white dominant society, but also the ways in which their marginalized community functioned. Currently, Arab American, Asian

American, Native American, Latino, and Black children are forced by the separation of home and school cultures to function in two unnecessarily dichotomized worlds (Ada, 1995). As adults, immigrants and people of color are similarly pressured to distance themselves from their cultural and linguistic background in order to assimilate into the social, educational, political, and economic structures of the dominant society (Takaki, 1993).

Whites, on the other hand, have a single yet exceedingly powerful consciousness, that of the dominant society. It is difficult for whites to look past their worldview because of their privileged social position. According to Wellman (1993),

Given the racial and class organization of American society, there is only so much people can "see." The positions they occupy in these structures limit the range of their thinking. The situation places barriers on their imaginations and restricts the possibilities of their vision. (p. 222)

Cochran-Smith (2000) concurs: "How we are positioned in terms of race and power vis-à-vis others has a great deal to do with how we see, what we see or want to see, and what we are able not to see" (p. 161).

I do not believe that well-intentioned whites knowingly dismiss the reality of people of color. Most whites deplore prejudice and discrimination (King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and vehemently deny that they are racist (Kivel, 1996; Tatum, 1992). Nevertheless, whites' actions have unintended consequences. Dysconscious racism helps explain the contradiction in the non-racist intentions of white people and the way they are perceived by people of color as perpetuating racism (hooks, 1990; Scheurich, 1993).

Once I learned about dysconscious racism, I was better able to engage in conversations about structural racism and white privilege. The conversations, both cross-racial and among white peers, helped me to learn about developing a positive white racial identity (Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1997) and how to put my good intentions into actions that would help dismantle the racial status quo. I discovered that trying to not be prejudiced on a personal level only lead to being non-racist, when what my students needed me to be was anti-racist.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As a teacher educator, I remind preservice and inservice teachers that despite exciting progress - including the election of a bi-racial President, Barack Obama - that the legacy of racism is not yet dismantled in our institutions and policies. Egregious inequalities are seen in the net-worth and economic opportunities of racial groups who are relegated to the lowest societal rungs, which impacts the property taxes that fund public schools. Decreased funding leads to differentials in school resources and facility quality, which in turn increases white flight and school segregation. Racial disparities are seen in test scores and school disaffiliation that cannot be attributed to social class or gender alone.

Teacher educators must strive to prepare teacher candidates who not only grapple with their biases on a personal and psychological level, but also confront racism and oppression on a structural level. This involves a simultaneous investigation of privilege, including but not limited to racial, socioeconomic, gender, linguistic, and sexual orientation. Especially for those of us who are white and native English-speaking, we must work on becoming "well-educated" about the racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of our students, as well as the way structural oppression impacts all of us.

A review of the literature reveals that teaching preservice teachers about race, prejudice, and privilege is an important political project for teacher educators. I am convinced that preservice teachers can better envision antiracism in their personal and professional lives when their teacher educators model these efforts. In turn, this generation of students will have more

teachers who understand racism, prejudice, and privilege.

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